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SUBJECT: RUSSIA - "TO THE BARRIER" NO MORE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The decision in late April to pull Vladimir Solovyev's program, "To the Barrier," from the airwaves stirred controversy among Moscow's commentariat, reflecting the often conflicted attitude toward the host and his contradictory role as both regime advocate and critic. The reasons for shuttering the program, as always, are unclear, with NTV network maintaining "business reasons" drove the cancellation. Others saw Solovyev's activity as a hired gun in the murky elite politics as a more convincing explanation, pointing to his attacks on Medvedev's legal reforms and his choice to head the Moscow Arbitration Court, as the trigger for the Kremlin backlash. The program was canceled only weeks before the Kremlin proposed a new system for selecting judges to the Constitutional Court by Presidential appointment (with approval from the Federation Council) -- indirect vindication of Solovyev's accusations that Medvedev was seeking to put the courts under his control. Whatever the reason, closing the show removes the last rare bit of spice from Russian television's menu of politically-managed, plain vanilla programming. End summary.

To the Barrier!

¶2. (SBU) On April 28, the management of the Gazprom-controlled NTV channel announced without explanation that Vladimir Solovyev's program, "To the Barrier," would no longer be aired as of May 1. The program pitted two opponents in usually vociferous debate on a specific topic, while a counter tolled the number of callers, phoning in to support one or the other of the participants (the one who garnered the most "won" the debate). The last program on April 23, which set the mercurial pit-bull of Russian politics, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, against the more mild-mannered, liberal former Deputy Head of the Federal Agency for Environment Oversight Oleg Mitvol on the issue of political party development in Russia, typified the program's style: flashy, contemporary, yet strident.

¶3. (SBU) Behind the scenes, the show was carefully managed to hew to an approved Kremlin line. Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations head Oleg Panfilov described to us the careful message management that Solovyev and his production team used to massage the final production, shown to Moscow and other central Russian viewers. As a participant in one of the shows, Panfilov noted that the director gave careful instructions to the audience (mainly students) as to when to applaud -- usually in support of Solovyev's commentary. Moreover, he claimed that the "points" system was manipulated to show support for one particular point of view; the show was shown first in the Far East; edited (to remove particularly "offensive" material); and then the call-in tally was re-formulated to tilt in favor of the Kremlin line. Thus, Panfilov noted, a participant could "win" the popular vote in Vladivostok, but would lose when the show aired in Moscow. Panfilov alleged that Solovyev took direction from "the Kremlin" even during the course of the filming.

The Reason Why

14. (SBU) Solovyev has publicly explained NTV's closure decision as reflecting "business considerations" -- a claim he made on his radio program on station "Silver Rain" as well as on his blog. Yet, in Russia's media culture, the financial bottom line matters far less than the political line, leading many here to look for hidden, political motives to explain the program's cancellation. Perhaps the easiest answer is that Solovyev's polarizing personality and penchant for getting enmeshed in political controversies (with allegations that he profited well from taking particular stances) created enemies who finally managed to shut him down -- at least on television.

15. (SBU) Given Solovyev's close connections to Putin and his team, our contacts surmise that the decision to pull the plug on "To the Barrier" could only have come from within the tandem. The prevailing theory is that Medvedev and his team were the driving force behind the decision, perhaps as a warning to Solovyev. Ekho Mosvky Editor Aleksey Venediktov said that shortly before NTV announced the program's closure, President Medvedev had had a conversation with Gazprom Media CEO Nikolay Senkevich about Solovyev's inquiry in connection with Valeriya Adamova's nomination as the chairman of the Moscow Federal Court of Arbitration in mid-April. (Medvedev's classmate, Adamova was confirmed as chairman of the court in early May, replacing Lyudmila Maykova, who had been dismissed for ethical violations because of an investigation also initiated by Solovyev.) Following Adamova's nomination, Solovyev sent a letter to the Judges' Supreme Qualifications Board questioning the sources of her

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income and housing property. Venediktov said that Solovyev made inquiries both on Maykova and Adamova in the interest of another, unnamed candidate for the chairmanship. Solovyev knew Adamova enjoyed Medvedev's support, but he could not step back because he had already made commitments and perhaps accepted money from the candidate. Whether this is true or not, Venediktov insisted that "To the Barrier" was shut down hours after Medvedev's phone call to Senkevich. According to Venediktov, if NTV wanted to close it down for commercial reasons, there was no need to this now because Solovyev contract was expiring on July 1 anyway.

16. (SBU) Center for Political Technologies analyst Tatyana Stanovaya, like Venediktov, also sees Medvedev and his supporters as likely culprits in the decision to cancel "To the Barrier." She notes that Solovyev's blog took a particularly nasty tone in discussing the President on April 15, making negative comparisons to Putin and poking fun at his penchant for fat neckties. Solovyev also raised concern that Medvedev sought "to bring the judiciary under the control of himself and his friends" -- allegations that preceded the Kremlin's announced proposal this week to have the President appoint judges to the Constitutional Court. Moreover, she notes that Solovyev's attack on Adamova may also have ruffled feathers within the NTV management and its parent company, Gazprom-Media, since Adamova's husband, Oleg Adamov, was the first deputy general director of NTV and an advisor to the general director of Gazprom-Media. In short, Solovyev may well have bitten the hand that kept him so well fed.

Admirers and Detractors

17. (SBU) Amongst the more liberal-minded commentators, the reaction has been mixed between lamentations about the closure of the last vestige of television pluralism and a certain schadenfreude over the perceived setback for one of the regime's unabashed public advocates. New Times Deputy Editor Yevgenia Albats essentially gave "good riddance to bad rubbish," dismissing Solovyev as a lobbyist for hire and his program as a public farce. She questioned his motives and

professional integrity, citing Solovyev's "award" from the Russian Media Watch as Russia's "most corrupt journalist." (In his defense, Solovyev's blog claims that the Media Watch is funded by players connected to Yukos, noting that none of the journalists that Khodorkovskiy bought to promote his agenda in the early 2000s were on the list.)

18. (SBU) Others, however, are less categorical about Solovyev and his program. Even Oleg Panfilov -- clearly not a fan of Solovyev himself -- decried the loss of "To the Barrier" as the last mainstream television program that aired views from across the political spectrum (within certain limits, of course) and gave liberals an opportunity to criticize the government, even if the playing field was tilted to favor the state. Few here deny Solovyev's talent for framing current issues and providing a rostrum for sometimes-sharp political disagreement.

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